

## Livestock groups condemn bison plan

By SCOTT McMILLION Chronicle Staff Writer

Two prominent Montana livestock groups this week condemned the idea of letting bison leave Yellowstone National Park even for short distances, in direct opposition to Gov. Brian Schweitzer's new bison initiatives.

The Montana Farm Bureau has issued a study that maintains brucellosis is too vast a threat to animal and human health to allow bison any extra room.

And the Montana Stockgrowers Association has issued a policy statement saying it opposes removing any cattle to make room for bison outside the park.

The documents outline positions that are not new for the ag groups. For years, they and others have urged the federal government to get aggressive about a brucellosis eradication and population reduction program inside Yellowstone.

"This is the same line they've drawn in the sand forever," said Dick Dolan, of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, which advocates for more space for bison. "It's unfortunate they're not willing to move forward."

For just as long, the National Park Service, with the strong support of environmental groups, has declined to undertake a brucellosis eradication program.

Jake Cummins, executive director of the Farm Bureau, said his group's report has been in the works for months.

"None of this is intended as any criticism of the governor," he said. "We just have a different perspective."

Still, the documents spell out the strong opposition the governor's ideas are drawing in cow country.

Schweitzer said Friday he will push on with his efforts.

"If there are people who don't want to cooperate, it's their prerogative," he said in a telephone interview.

The Stockgrowers Association called for sticking with the current bison management plan, which relies on repeated hazings plus the capture and slaughter of bison. It costs about \$1 million a year.

Schweitzer said that is a failed plan. Over recent years, it resulted in the doubling of the park's bison herd, which means a doubling of infected animals.

He's been touting an idea that would pay ranchers in the bison "mixing zones" near the park for their grazing rights and then remove the cattle. Then there would be a hunting season for several months, with more focus on killing female animals to lower the overall population.

The concept has been popular with hunting and environmental groups, but not with agriculture, which fears losing the state's brucellosis-free status obtained in 1985.

Losing it would cost the ranching industry somewhere between \$4 million and \$16 million in extra expenses, mostly for labor and disease testing, the Montana Farm Bureau report says.

In addition, because brucellosis carries such a stigma among ranchers, the presence of the disease could reduce cattle prices by somewhere between \$5 million and \$26 million, the report says.

If the higher estimates proved true, they would be the equivalent of 3.8 percent of 2005 beef sales in the state.

If the lower estimates proved true, they would amount to less than 1 percent of 2005 beef sales.

"The National Park Service must take responsibility for animals under their jurisdiction or pay for the losses incurred by their failure to do so," the report concludes.

Cummins called on the Park Service to manage Yellowstone "like a ranch. Why not keep your animals inside your boundary. We want them to keep their animals in the ranch just like we do ours."

The Stockgrowers policy opposes "any modifications to the existing (bison plan) calling for the elimination of livestock grazing in the area designed to expand the range for bison leaving (Yellowstone) and entering Montana."

Removing cattle "sets a bad precedent," according to Stockgrowers Executive Vice President Errol Rice. "Every time there's a conflict they (the cattle) are the sacrificial lamb."

Stockgrowers want to "exhaust all efforts" to get state and federal governments to agree to a brucellosis elimination plan.

However, that likely would mean about half the park's bison would be rounded up and killed, which likely would ignite considerable controversy.

It also would require big changes in — and perhaps elimination of — the wintertime elk feedgrounds in Wyoming, which foster a high prevalence of the disease in thousands of elk.

The Wyoming Stockgrowers Association supports the feedground program because their members don't want the elk to disperse to other winter ranges, Rice said.

The Farm Bureau study called for "zero tolerance for bison outside the park" until brucellosis and private property issues are completely addressed.

"The benefit of bison outside Yellowstone is unclear and unquantifiable, while the risks are well documented and monumental," the study said.

"We're being put in a bad situation," he said. "I think it's time to push back a little bit."

Scott McMillion is at [scottm@dailychronicle.com](mailto:scottm@dailychronicle.com)